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Independent evaluation of the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa

Note by the Secretary-General[1]

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the Committee for Programme and Coordination his comments on the report entitled "Independent evaluation of the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa" (E/AC.51/2001/6).

Notes

[1] The evaluation contained in E/AC.51/2001/6 reflects the independent views of three experts. While the note of the Secretary-General reflects an overall view on the evaluation, there are several comments and observations made by the experts, in their independent capacity which are not necessarily shared by the Secretary-General.

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Following consideration at its fortieth session (5-30 June 2000) of the progress report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the United Nations Special Initiative on Africa (UNSIA), the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) requested that an independent evaluation covering the five-year duration of the Initiative be carried out and submitted to it at its forty-first session. This evaluation report of the independent consultants, commissioned by the Administrator of UNDP and the Executive Secretary of ECA, in their capacity as co-chairs of the Special Initiative, has been submitted separately to the CPC.

The report's main recommendation is that the Special Initiative should be brought to a close. Except for UNESCO, which considered the implications of the report to be "far-reaching" and indicated that they may refer the matter to their Governing Body before making any comments, the United Nations system organizations, which commented on the Evaluation Report, agree with its findings and main recommendation that "the existence of SIA as a continuing special initiative should be brought to a close at a time considered appropriate by the decision-making bodies of the United Nations". (FAO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, WHO and the World Bank provided comments on the report.)

It should be recalled that UNSIA is a response of the United Nations system to the request in paragraph 39 of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF) (General Assembly resolution 46/151, annex) that the organizations of the United Nations system play a major role in its implementation, devising in their respective areas, specific programmes consistent with the elements of the New Agenda. UNSIA is also a response to the request by the CPC in Programme 45 of the United Nations medium-term plan 1992-1997 that a system-wide plan of action for African economic recovery and development be established to serve as a coordination mechanism of the activities of the United Nations system in Africa. As the final appraisal of the UN-NADAF is scheduled for 2002, the timing for a critical examination of the UNSIA seems appropriate.

United Nations system organizations which commented on the evaluation report generally agreed that, since the objectives of UNSIA are now being absorbed more effectively by existing and planned coordinating mechanisms that are more country-based, and respond to Africa's development challenges, the continuation of a "Special Initiative" did not provide any value-added. Particular reference was made to coordinating mechanisms such as the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), the Resident Coordinator system and the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP), which have recently enhanced inter-agency coordination at the country level.

Most of the organizations acknowledged that some UNSIA clusters had worked better than others. In this context, it was suggested that the report's conclusions and recommendations could have benefited from a more detailed examination of set-backs and constraints at the specific cluster and field levels.

In commenting on the recommendations on the framework for a new approach, a number of agencies agreed on the need for dialogue, but cautioned against the creation of yet another structure, and recommended that this opportunity be used to rationalize structures resulting from other initiatives on Africa. It was suggested that indicators and benchmarks be established to gauge progress in inter-agency coordination.

It is clear from the evaluation report and the comments by the United Nations system organizations that, despite its potential, the UNSIA programme has had limited impact, largely due to various aspects of its conceptualization and planning. These include its top-down nature, a degree of scepticism within United Nations organizations on UNSIA's value-added, confusion surrounding the mobilization of resources for the UNSIA programme, the lack of incentives for collaboration within and beyond the United Nations system, and a lack of harmonization with other United Nations coordination mechanisms.

The top leadership of the United Nations has provided consistent support and guidance to UNSIA. UNSIA was strongly supported by the then Secretary-General at its launch in March 1996. Following the assumption of office of the new Secretary-General at the end of 1996, the United Nations top leadership continued to give the Special Initiative vigorous support. Indeed, in his message to the ECA Conference of Ministers and in his statement to the OAU Summit of Heads of State and Government in 1997, the Secretary-General presented the Special Initiative as a framework for mobilizing and harmonizing the assistance of the United Nations system to Africa. In March 1998, the Secretary-General sent to the United Nations system, a message on the theme "The Special Initiative on Africa Must Succeed". In 1999, the Deputy Secretary-General presided at an important high-level coordination meeting in Nairobi, which reached the critical decision to use UNSIA as a coordination mechanism of the United Nation system's work in Africa. The Deputy Secretary-General further set out a clear plan in this regard, which was approved by the ACC in October 1999. However, at the agency and field levels, some of the efforts were diffused because of the multiple initiatives on Africa. This diffusion of focus is probably what is being alluded to in the comments on leadership which are made in the evaluation report.

The independent evaluation of the UNSIA programme has provided the United Nations and its development partners with an important opportunity. It is incumbent upon all involved to absorb the valuable lessons learned from the UNSIA experience and to take them into account in the elaboration of all future coordinating mechanisms for United Nations work in Africa.